



## PORTS

**Parks Online Resources for Teachers and Students**

*Distance Learning with California State Parks*



California's state parks and its schools have worked closely together for many years to protect our extraordinary natural and cultural resources and to educate our children. Field trips to state parks have been a favorite educational experience for generations of California's school children. However, an ever-increasing percentage of students are not afforded this traditional experience. More and more students are living in urban areas where distance or economic and social barriers prevent them from experiencing the values of the California State Parks. Budget and staffing issues make it difficult for schools throughout the state to visit parks. In response to these situations, and in an effort to make our parks more relevant to the rapidly changing and diverse population of California, the California State Parks has initiated the Parks Online Resources for Teachers and Students (PORTS) program.

By using technology, we are able to reach a very diverse audience that would not otherwise receive the park message. Students in an urban Los Angeles classroom are able to talk directly to rangers on the slopes of the Sierra Nevada, tour the State Capitol, or



follow a lifeguard as she explores the underwater world off our coast. In addition, we are able to make some park resources available that are not typically accessible to park visitors. For example, children in our most populated regions can observe and study delicate wildflowers that are only found miles from the nearest paved road. They can view Native American rock art located in the most remote areas of the state. Warehouses full of cultural treasures can be utilized by

classes that otherwise would never even know that such bounty existed.

The PORTS program strives not only to close the distance between today's urban youth and their natural and cultural heritage, but also to close the technological divide that separates their schools from the world beyond their walls. To accomplish these goals we have drawn upon the combined strengths of schools and parks to create several units of study that directly address various academic content standards and park themes.

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Each unit of study has two primary elements:

- 1) **“On-demand”** multimedia materials concerning state parks and addressing academic content standards presented via the DCP. These materials are available at all times to teachers and students via the DCP.
- 2) **“Live Digital Video Sessions”** using video conferencing technologies through which students can interact with park employees and experience park activities.

One video conferencing program sends a live, ranger narrated, video feed from Año Nuevo State Reserve (home to northern elephant seals) into classrooms throughout the state. One camera (SealCam) is located in the midst of a breeding colony of elephant seals on Año Nuevo Island. Another camera is located in Atos where a ranger presents a fifteen-minute program that is aligned with California Academic Content Standards. The signal from the island is mixed into a presentation that superimposes the ranger on the seal video much like a TV weather person in front of a weather map. Teachers and students prepare for the presentations with material obtained from a web site before viewing the presentation.

The “Building Bridges” unit of study uses video conferencing to create a partnership between two classrooms and parks from different areas of the state. Rangers visit the classrooms and help the teachers address academic content standards and park themes.



As teachers address standards, the ranger relates those standards to a park close to the students. The children also take trips to their local park to see first hand the science and history they have been studying in the classroom.

Using digital photos, digital video, presentation software, and other tools, the students periodically prepare reports concerning "their park." The two classrooms then communicate via a video conference using the DCP. During the video conference the students present their

report to their “sister school” and teach each other about “their park” and themselves.

Schools close to parks like Baldwin Hills State Park, Taylor Yard State Park and Cornfields State Park that are located in urban centers are ideal for this program. When paired with schools and parks in rural areas, the program gives students an understanding of the state’s tremendous cultural and physical diversity.

Schools and parks have also created several other units of study that are developed locally, and then made available to schools throughout the state via the DCP. Each unit of study includes in-class lesson plans, on-line material, and video conferences with parks.

County and local school districts are an integral part of PORTS. County offices of education “connect” the parks and schools through the DCP. Individual school districts provide the personnel to collaborate with park staff in developing curriculum for each location. The State Parks provide the personnel and supplemental resources for presentations. The parks, county offices of education, and the individual districts collaborate in constructing the “on-demand” material for teachers and students.

Each of the locations in PORTS is a separate entity within the project. An individual



school district (or combination of more than one district) and State Parks work together to plan and implement the program at each location. Students from these districts are the initial participants in the program. This structure allows students, educators, park staff, funding sources, and other participants to focus on a small, manageable product. A practical and equitable system of reserving the video-conferencing sessions will be established.

Currently, schools in San Diego, Orange, Sacramento, Monterey, Marin and Los Angeles counties are participating in the development of this program. These programs allow children located anywhere in California to “visit” Año Nuevo State Reserve, Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, Crystal Cove State Park, the State Capitol Museum, and Angel Island State Park.

The California State Park PORTS program furthers the mission of the state parks and improves the education of California school children by using the power of the Digital California Project. It allows students in urban areas and other locales to experience the grandness of their state parks, while addressing academic content standards. Often these students, due to their physical and cultural environments, are unaware of the values and importance of the California State Park System. The PORTS program allows economically disadvantaged children to experience parks hundreds of miles from their homes in areas rarely visited by their families. The inspiring backdrops of our state parks buttress their lessons of history, visual and performing arts, science, math, and English. This integrated program using multiple technological approaches truly brings the State Parks to the classroom.

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